

Wisdom

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Historically, wisdom (sagacity) has its roots tied to religious traditions. From India's Vedas, to Egyptian proverbs, and to Christian and Islamic psalms, various religions have attempted to define wisdom and have professed the importance of fostering it. While these contributions to the understanding of wisdom cannot be ignored, it was not until philosophers intervened that the world began to attempt to systematically define and analyze wisdom as its own construct.

Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, distinguished between two different types of wisdom (1) *sophia* and (2) *phronesis*. *Sophia* can be defined as consisting of any scientific or factual knowledge; while, *phronesis* can be defined as consisting of an understanding of how to live practically and how to live well. Continuing the precedent set forth by theology and philosophy, psychology has taken on the pursuit of understanding wisdom.

As a scientific discipline which focuses on the understanding of the human mind and behavior, psychology has primarily explored *phronesis*. This exploration has led to many novel definitions and approaches to wisdom. Several theories of wisdom have developed, but the majority of those theories view wisdom as consisting of the interplay of multiple psychological capacities. These theories primarily differ with regards to how they propose those multiple psychological capacities interact. Monika Ardelt (2009) defined wisdom as a combination of personality characteristics (cognitive, reflective, and affective). The word combination only suggests that those personality characteristics interact; it provides little understanding concerning the nature of that interaction.

Some psychological theories have conceptualized wisdom as an integration of multiple psychological capacities. For example, Shedlock and Cornelius (2003) view wisdom as an integration of cognition and emotion. The word integration suggests a complimentary relationship between cognition and emotion. Like Shedlock and Cornelius's integration approach to wisdom, another proposed theory of wisdom provides a more specific conceptualization of how psychological capacities interact to produce wisdom.

Roger Sternberg's balance theory defines wisdom as the utilization of implicit knowledge that is mediated by a desire for the common good. This desire for the common good balances multiple interests (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal) and multiple environments (existing and novel). Sternberg's conceptualization views wisdom as understanding how to make decisions and behave in difficult, complex situations.

Paul Baltes and Ute Staudinger (2000) view wisdom as the pinnacle of human excellence. According to Baltes and Staudinger, wisdom arises when two or more of an individual's mental capacities, such as morality and emotions, mature sufficiently. Other important mental capacities include cognition, ego, motivation, perception, social, and worldview. These mental capacities are differentially developed across individuals; thus, the wisdom inhabited and exhibited by one person is distinct to that inhabited and exhibited by another person.

The aforementioned theories and approaches provide unique conceptualizations of how different psychological capacities interact to produce wisdom; however, they are all similar with regards to the fact that all of them provide somewhat vague definitions. The vagueness in these definitions is unfortunate but important because they reflect the fact that wisdom, as a construct, is not fully understood. While a lack of understanding concerning wisdom is understandable, a continued lack of understanding is not acceptable. Beyond the need for truth being

fundamentally connected the scientific ethos; heightened understanding of wisdom has very real practical implications. Hypothetically, considering Sternberg's view, wisdom could be viewed as an ability that should be fostered within society.

Every individual could benefit from an improved ability to make good decisions in complex situations which is not only personally beneficial but also benefits society. This type of wisdom would importantly benefit the individual in the various roles (citizen, employee, student, parent, child, spouse, etc.) that they inhabit in life. For example, a citizen with wisdom, irrespective of political allegiances, would make more prudent use of their right to vote. A student with wisdom, charged with leading a group in completing a project in which specific group members fail to contribute, will find ways to convince those group members that it is in their best interest to contribute. The future of the study of wisdom should take stock of what has been accomplished, arrive at a consensus, and generate a specific plan of action.

See Also:

Further Reading

Ardelt, M. (2009). How similar are wise men and women? A comparison across two age cohorts.

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Baltes, P. B., & Staudinger, U. M. (2000). Wisdom: A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue towards excellence. *American Psychologist, 55*, 122-136.

Shedlock, D., & Cornelius, S. (2003). Psychological approaches to wisdom and its development.

In J. Demick & C. Andreoletti (Eds.), *Handbook of adult development*, New York, NY:

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Sternberg, R. J. (1998). A balance theory of wisdom. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(4), 347-365.

Walsh, R. (2012). Wisdom an integral view. *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, 7(1), 1-21.